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ABSTRACT

Utah State University offers a mild/moderate special teacher preparation program via an Internet-based teleconferencing system, with extensive use of the Internet for delivering course materials, assignments, student feedback, and class projects. Students attend classes in eight remote sites, many of which are located in rural communities. Most students taking the course are mothers who are employed at least part-time. The average student age is 35. Throughout the program, these students need advising information and technical support to make the best use of their limited time and resources. The university has developed a model of student support and technical assistance that combines the use of technology for information delivery and face-to-face interactions with local site advisors or mentors. Two advising Web sites are used to support the distance education program--one targets student needs, the other is for advisors. Before beginning the program, students attend a workshop that trains them to access technology-delivered information, communicate with faculty, and complete and submit assignments electronically. Local site advisors help remote learners access university resources, attend classes with the students, and work with faculty to assist students with assignments. A distance education advisor advises students and coordinates the training and work of the site advisors. Program completion rates are greater than national rates for distance programs and are attributed to the extensive student support. (TD)

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HELPING RURAL SPECIAL EDUCATION PRESERVICE TEACHERS SURVIVE THE VIRTUAL WILDERNESS

Introduction

As more and more university courses and programs are delivered in technology-based formats via distance education, an increasing number of questions arise about effectively advising and supporting distance education students (Palloff & Pratt, 2003). The world of distance learning can be a virtual wilderness for rural distance education students who lack the skills, services, and support to navigate unknown terrain. The availability of quality, technology-based resources greatly enhance the likelihood that students will survive in the wilderness of distance learning (Wager, 2000; Wilka & Fitzner, 1998). Rural distance education students and their advisors need access to helpful, accurate, complete, and supportive information. Traditional models of advising which require students to travel to campus and meet with an advisor to obtain information and guidance will not work in a virtual learning environment (Pevoto, 2000). The use of technology becomes the key factor to enhance an advisor's ability to deliver information aimed at assisting and guiding the increasing number of rural distance education students. In addition, these students must have an opportunity to develop a supportive relationship with a caring adult in the university environment (Crocket, 2002; Pevoto, 2000; Ramos, 2000). The advisor assumes both roles for students entering university distance education programs by providing information and communicating that there is someone who cares about the student. Technology can facilitate both of these roles.

Distance education students living in rural communities are isolated from traditional university resources and support infrastructures. Many are nontraditional students returning to the university. Many lack the technology skills needed to access virtual resources. They need the guidance and support of university advisors whom they can access. The challenge for distance education programs is to create easily accessible technology-based resources coupled with local community personnel and infrastructures to support these students. Development of effective advising models must include discussions of what works and doesn't work and how to replicate or adapt existing advising models. To effectively advise and mentor distance education students, innovative advising models must be developed that combine the effective use of technology and the creation of a local community infrastructure.

Unique Rural Distance Education Student Needs

In developing a distance education advising model, it is important to consider the program to be delivered, the program locations and local resources, and the students and their unique needs. The distance education virtual advising model described in this paper was developed to support the Mild/Moderate Special Education Distance Education Program delivered by the Utah State University (USU) Department of Special Education and Rehabilitation in partnership with Time Enhanced Learning (Distance Education). This distance education program offers students coursework leading to a B.S. in Special Education with licensure in teaching students with mild/moderate disabilities in grades K-12. Students with degrees can also complete the program to receive a second bachelor's degree, a special education mild/moderate teaching license, and/or a special education master's degree. Courses are delivered via an internet-based teleconferencing system with extensive use of the internet (WebCT and email) for delivering course materials, readings, assignments, student feedback, and class projects. Students complete the program as members of a two-year cohort group. Students attend classes in eight remote sites, many of which are located in rural communities many miles from the university campus. University branch campuses are located in all of the sites, however, specific program advising is not provided at these campuses.

The majority of the students enrolled in the program are nontraditional students returning to the university after a long absence. Some are adults seeking to move from a previous career in another field, while others are women who have interrupted their university training to raise a family. About 90% of the students are female, and 80% have children. The average age of the students is 35. Most are employed at least part-time, and many work full-time. Approximately 40% of the students are already employed as full-time teachers in special education classrooms. These students teach with emergency licensure offered from the Utah State Office of Education in areas where there are shortages of fully licensed special education teachers. All of the students enrolled in the program are tied to their local communities and have made a commitment to live and teach in the local schools. It would be next to impossible for these students to move to an on campus location in order to complete a special education degree. Additionally, these students need to be trained to meet the critical shortages of highly qualified special education teachers which exist in every local community served by the USU distance education program. Recruiting special education teachers to move to rural communities is challenging and not often successful. A more effective model is to train rural community members to become special education teachers. Graduates of the USU teacher preparation program tend to stay and work in their local rural communities for long periods of time.

The students need accurate and timely advising information throughout the program in order to make best use of their limited time and resources. An avenue for the students to ask questions and communicate their needs must be provided. The transition to the university should include a local contact that can provide both technology support and a human touch. Students benefit from mentoring through the university coursework (assignments, study groups, practicum) and the university learning culture. The students need reminders and assistance with navigating registration and graduation deadlines, as well as program specific applications and deadlines. One of the biggest needs of these non-traditional learners is technology support at their local sites as well as in their homes.

Virtual Student Support and Advising Model

Initially distance education/technology advising models focused on online delivery of information such as course information, electronic reserves, transcripts, and surveys along with e-mail communication with instructors (Martys, Redman, Huff, Czar, Mullane, Bennett, & Getty, 1998). Subsequent models of distance or technology-based advising extended beyond information delivery to include the use of technology tools to focus on interactions via such technologies as telephone, fax, websites, e-mail, chat, listservs, audio/video conferencing, and virtual office hours (Buchanan, 2000; Pevoto, 2000; Steele & Gordon, 2001; Wilka & Fitzner, 1998). The shift to a focus on virtual communication and interactions is imperative in order to deliver accurate and timely information and to establish collaborative mentoring relationships (Brigham, 2001).

The USU Mild/Moderate Special Education Program support and advising model was developed to focus on providing support for students and facilitating communication as well as delivering information via technology. Goals of the support and advising model are to:

- provide a model that focuses on increasing student success and retention in the university environment;
- integrate strategies that have been proven successful in assisting students via integrating technology and distance education site advisors;
- develop and maintain current on-campus and distance education advising websites;
- continually update website components to include online entrance applications, information sheets, planning guides, admissions checklists, schedules, course offerings, faculty information, and links to financial aid applications, articulation agreements, admission applications, graduation applications, and other university resources as available and needed;
- integrate course materials developed in a WebCT platform into the advising website;
- effectively communicate and establish supportive relationships with students via email;
- use of innovative internet-based audio video teleconferencing technology to facilitate face-to-face interactions with distance education students, faculty, and advisors;
- develop a model for recruiting and training distance education site advisors; and
- develop an advising website specifically designed for site advisors to use as the work with students.

This distance education advising model has developed over a five-year period as the program staff responded to student feedback, student's needs, and advances in technology. It is a collaborative effort with the Department of Special Education and Rehabilitation and Time Enhanced Learning at Utah State University, the

Utah State Office of Education, and the local rural school districts. The model includes the use of websites and technology-delivered materials, preparing students to effectively use technology to learn, and local support personnel or site advisors. This model differs from the virtual, technology-based models proposed in the literature (Wager, 2000) in that it combines a two-fold approach to advising and supporting students. The model combines the use of technology for information delivery and advising interactions with a focus on local site advisors or mentors who meet and interact face-to-face with students. This is a unique combination of services for distance learners.

Websites and Technology-Delivered Materials

Two advising websites are currently used to support the distance education program. The first website targeted to the needs of current and prospective students. The website is used to disseminate program information and provide access to web-based course materials. The student website includes program information, advising information, links to local site advisors, links to USU advising information, links to financial aid information, course schedules, frequently asked questions, learning at a distance guidance, and access to all program course materials via course webpages. Every program course has a course webpage used to deliver information, readings, and assignments to students. Most of this site has unrestricted access for students with the exception of the course materials, which are only accessed by students enrolled in specific courses and site advisors. The website is located at http://sped.usu.edu/mild. The second website is password protected and is designed for use by advisors. The advising website was developed to compliment the student website. It provides all of the information that students can access and additional information that only advisors can access: contact logs to use to record information about student interactions, student planning guides, frequently asked questions regarding advising and mentoring, and access to all of the course materials delivered to the students via the course web pages in the Web CT course delivery software. The site is located at http://spedadvising.usu.edu. Both websites are designed for access by persons with disabilities. The sites are designed for easy access to information and functionality.

Preparing Nontraditional Distance Education Students

In the initial program cohorts, students and faculty members struggled with the lack of student technology skills. During the initial semester of each cohort program, students spend much of their time learning to access course materials from the course websites and to communicate with faculty members and turn in assignments. As a result, faculty members and students became frustrated. Faculty members were not able to teach, and students were not able to learn. This resulted in a large number of students dropping out of the program after the first semester. To help better prepare students to be successful in the distance learning environment, the Learning at a Distance Workshop was developed and implemented in 1999. The focus of the workshop is to train program students to access technology-delivered information, to learn to communicate with faculty members, and to complete and submit assignments electronically. This training takes place the summer BEFORE students begin the program. Each student enrolls in a one credit course held in their local communities. Students are trained in local USU Time Enhanced Learning site computer labs where available. All lesson materials and applied learning activities are also available on the program website. Students can return again and again to the website to refresh their skills. The materials, activities, and information can be accessed by site advisors as well as they work through technology problems with the students. All students must display mastery of the skills prior to starting the program.

Local Support Personnel and Infrastructures

The local site advisors provide the bridge to help remote learners access the university resources including accurate and timely program information. In addition, they attend classes with the students and work collaboratively with faculty members to assist students with course tasks and assignments. The site advisors are all exemplary graduates of the USU special education program. Site advisors are selected based on exemplary completion of USU's special education program, exemplary special education teaching experience, recommendations from local school districts, excellent communication and interpersonal skills, a willingness to maintain high standards, and the ability to work independently. They understand the program and its demands. All of the advisors have special education teaching experience. Some are full-time teachers, while others are young mothers who want to maintain a professional connection and need flexible working hours. Their role is to advise, support, and mentor students in their local communities as the students prepare for and progress through the program. They are available by email or phone to help students plan out their program and meet program requirements. The site advisors often attend class with the students and provide study groups. Sometimes they supervise the students in practicum experiences.

Site advisors are trained in a number of different ways. Most of the training is done in their local communities; however, sometimes all of the site advisors attend training sessions on campus, usually during the summer. Training is continuous and includes campus training sessions, local site training sessions, modeled advising sessions with actual students, telephone and email question and answer sessions, listserv information, participation in professional conferences, meetings with local school and district personnel, and electronic and print resources.

A part-time distance education advisor advises students and coordinates the training and work of the site advisors. Due to the complexity of and technical nature of transcript analysis, the distance education advisor handles this aspect of advising. The distance education advisor and the site advisors work as a team to support and advise students. The distance education advisor is trained by the department advisor. Funding for the distance education advisor and local site advisors is provided by the Utah State Office of Education, Special Education Services Unit.

In addition, cooperating teachers and university supervisors are hired to assist with field-based practica courses. The teachers and supervisors work for local school districts and are selected based upon their expertise and excellence as special education teachers. They work collaboratively with the program director, faculty members, and school district leadership to develop classroom sites where preservice students can master critical teaching skills.

Funding

Funding distance education advising and student support activities can be challenging in light of limited budgets and a lack of trained personnel. This program receives funding from the USU Time Enhanced Learning Division, the USU Department of Special Education and Rehabilitation, and the Special Education Services Unit of the Utah State Office of Education. Combined funds from all of these entities support a full-time program director who also teaches in the program, a part-time distance education advisor, and a part-time staff assistant. Technology support is provided by the university in the form of about 10 hours per week for a web designer and hardware and software support as needed. Local site advisors work from four to five hours per week and are paid with state office funds. Local district cooperating teachers and university supervisors are paid from course-generated tuition funds.

Impact of the Virtual Advising Model

When the USU special education distance education program begin in 1995, the program staff consisted of a director who drove to each of the remote sites to advise students. There was no website or local community support person nor was there a local community infrastructure to support students and practica experiences. This has all been developed over time. As the support websites and infrastructures have been built, the program completion rate as increased from about 55% to about 73%. This is well above the national completion rate of 26% found at similar public institutions. Program leadership and faculty attribute much of the increase in the completion rate to the development of student support and advising websites and local site advisor support (Crockett, 2002). (Table 1.)

Table 1. Program success: Retention and completion rates

Number of Starters	Number of Graduates	Percentage of Graduates	Number and Location of Delivery Sites
9 students began Fall 1995	5 students graduated Spring 1997	55%	2 Roosevelt & Vernal
24 students began Fall 1997	12 students graduated Spring 1999	50%	3 Roosevelt, Vernal & Tooele
41 students began Fall 1999	30 students graduated Spring 2001	73%	7 Roosevelt, Vernal, Tooele, Salt Lake Ogden/Davis, Brigham City, UVSC
39 began Fall 2001	28** **anticipated graduates Spring and Fall 2003	72%**	8 Roosevelt, Vernal, Tooele, Salt Lake Ogden/Davis, Brigham City, UVSC, Logan

Future Directions

The current student support and advising model is not perfect and needs to continually be updated and revised to more effectively meet the needs of the rural distance education students. Future plans include an evaluation of the advising and student support model and the program websites by graduates, current students, and students who are applying to the program. In addition, national experts in the field of distance education special education teacher preparation will be asked to review the program and advising websites. Based upon the feedback received in the evaluation process, the websites and web-based materials will be updated and revised to more effectively deliver information to meet the needs of the students. An evaluation of the site advisor activities will also be conducted, and training activities developed to provide updated information to the advisors and to train them to effectively support distance learners.

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